

## *Executive summary*

Athens' approach to migrant and refugee integration is largely affected by two aspects. First, Greece has been facing, since 2008, a dire economic situation that has triggered high unemployment and public budget cuts. Second, between 2015 and 2016 Greece received unprecedented inflows of asylum seekers and refugees adding pressure on the public service delivery in a number of sectors that deal with reception and integration. The number of refugees and asylum seekers in Athens was estimated in 2017 at 18 000 people. Under these circumstances, the city developed an integrated refugee reception system in cooperation with national and international partners (donors, foundations, NGOs and civil society) in order to ensure basic service provision.

Despite the focus on recent challenges, Greece had experienced immigration well before 2015. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990, many migrants came from the Balkans, the ex-Soviet Union and Central Europe; and since 2008, inflows from Asia, Africa and the Middle East increased due to its location on southern European border. According to the latest census in 2011, the Municipality of Athens has a population of 664 046 people, of which some 23% are foreign nationals. In 2016, the city counted 77 806 migrants with residence permits. The largest groups of nationalities are Albanians (38 469), followed in much smaller numbers from the Philippines, Bangladesh and Ukraine. The economic crisis made the situations of some migrant groups (in particular Albanians) more precarious and questioned their long-term residence in the country. As a result, while numerous new asylum seekers and refugees arrived in Athens in 2015-16, many long-standing migrants left the city.

Yet the unprecedented flow since 2015 changed the responses to reception and integration by public authorities at all levels. At the national level one of the consequences of the increased migration inflow has been the formulation of a new National Integration Strategy by the Ministry for Migration Policy that is now (June 2018) under consultation. The new National Integration Strategy foresees the co-operation and involvement of all policy levels (central, regional and local) and actors (national authorities, local authorities, organisations, NGOs, public and private sector), while it highlights the role of local authorities, which have a crucial role to play in diversity management and migrant integration. At local level the increase in new arrivals deepened the relation between the municipality and non-state actors establishing a much more active interaction in formulating, funding, implementing and evaluating reception and integration policies in the city.

Overall, Athens' approach to migrant and refugee integration aims at ensuring equal access to social services for all people in the city. Within the highly-centralised governance system municipalities have limited competences in sectors related to migrant integration. Nevertheless the city of Athens decided to act to ensure better reception and integration by complementing national government policies. In this context, the municipality is very active providing a set of initiatives that contribute to socio-economic inclusion of migrants and refugees as well as of other vulnerable host groups, including

through reinforced local coordination. However, their sustainability is not guaranteed and they could gain in efficiency through more coordinated action with other levels of government and stable funding.

The main aim of this case study is to reflect on and analyse how the city of Athens organises and implements the integration and reception of migrants and refugees within its own institutional framework as well as in interaction with other stakeholders, including across levels of government.

## Key Findings

These key findings are presented according to the OECD Checklist for Public Action to Migrant Integration at the Local Level and summarise some of the remaining challenges, what is being done and room for improvement. It also identifies best practices that could be replicated in other cities.

### *Some of the remaining challenges*

#### *'In-transit' country status*

Lack of employment opportunities is one of the factors that make integration even more challenging in Athens than in other contexts and contribute to the desire of many refugees and migrants to continue their journey towards other more prosperous EU countries. This significantly impacts refugees' effort to integrate, to learn the language and their commitment to sending their children to school. Hence, it is crucial for the country as well as the municipality to communicate that it is important, while being in Greece, to seize education and language opportunities as an investment for the future regardless of the final destination country. This holds true especially as more refugees and asylum seekers are likely to stay in the country after the so called "Balkan Route" was closed.

#### *Multi-level governance*

Greece has a highly-centralised system in comparison to other OECD countries, with only 7.1% of public expenditure spent at sub-national level, against an OECD average of 40.4%. This limits municipalities' ability to play a decisive role in migrant integration. However, the 2010 decentralisation reform called 'Kallikratis' shifted competences from provinces to municipalities in the sphere of social policy. The new responsibilities were related to day care for children, the protection of elderly people, support for families and vulnerable groups, the implementation of public health programmes, and the tackling of social exclusion and marginalisation of the poor, migrants, and the uninsured. Still, no specific additional budget was attributed to these competences limiting the capacity to implement them, and resulting in sporadic migrant integration programmes. The new National Integration Strategy is expected to provide a coherent approach across levels of government through coordination of services, initiatives and projects on migrant-related issues.

#### *Financial constraints and dependency on donors*

Budget cuts due to the economic crisis and austerity measures, lack of allocation of extra funds for the management of the refugee crisis and the lack of competence to apply EU funds directly have created a particularly restrictive financial framework for the city approach to migrant integration. Consequently, non-state funding is a key source of financing often lacking sustainability due to short-term funding cycles.

### *Unemployment and sagging labour market discourages refugees from staying in Greece*

The high rates of unemployment in Greece and the poor state of the labour market makes it very challenging to implement policies facilitating migrants' integration into the job market; thus, integrating migrants into the job market is even more challenging in Athens than in other countries and cities. In November 2017, 20% of the overall Greek population was unemployed. In Athens, numbers were even higher at a staggering 51%. In the region of Attica (whose capital is Athens), the income gap between native-born and migrant populations (69%) is the second highest in all OECD regions. The gap in employment opportunities is a major concern for the city and all residents and constitutes one of the reasons why many refugees do not wish to stay in the city. Employment policies are a central competence in Greece. Both recognized refugees and asylum seekers are allowed to work since the moment they apply for international protection and receive the relevant Applicant's Card, however there are limited mechanisms in place to facilitate their entry in the labour market such as skills assessment and validation mechanisms. At the city level, the municipal agency ADDMA (Athens Development and Destination Management) implements programmes supporting employment opportunities for the most vulnerable groups including migrants. Many of these projects involve migrant associations.

### ***What is already being done and how it could be improved***

#### *Housing and Social Segregation*

Athens is among the cities in the sample that considered segregation as a very high, or highly unfavourable factor to integration. In the past twenty years, there has been an increasing move from the city centre to the suburbs, triggering devaluation in some parts of the city centre. Many migrants and vulnerable groups occupied uninhabited buildings. The municipality doesn't have an extensive social housing system and is currently looking at mechanisms to map uninhabited buildings and use them for social purposes. This approach has been applied to find housing solutions for refugees (see description below), showing the city's willingness to experiment and find innovative solutions to cope with rocketing refugee arrivals and growing housing needs. ADDMA liaises with private landlords regarding uninhabited units scattered throughout the city, thus preventing newcomers from concentrating in most exposed areas of the city; Such schemes merit to be closely monitored to assess their sustainability and could potentially be scaled up in order to address the needs of other vulnerable groups.

#### *Athens Coordination Centre for Refugees and Migrants (ACCMR): a strategic platform to formulate a bottom-up Local Integration Strategy*

Benefitting from external funding, the city was able to establish the Athens Coordination Centre for Refugees and Migrants as a coordination platform between various stakeholders active in the provision of services in Athens and the city. The Centre structures its work in five committees, that each serves a specific sector dealing with migrant and refugee integration (housing, employment, health, education and legal support). Through these committees the municipality formulated a Strategic Action Plan for the Integration of Migrant and Refugees, approved by the Mayor in April 2018 and designed new municipal activities. All actions, while being led by the city's Deputy Mayor for Migrants and Refugees, are built on funding availability and engagement of partners from other levels of government as well as international and national NGOs and

foundations. This is an important constraint in devising a local integration strategy, yet ensures that important stakeholders are continuously included in the process. In practice, while the actions were clearly developed with the aim to facilitate refugee integration, they also concern other categories of migrants as well as vulnerable members of the host community.

The ACCMR also plays a key role in coordinating with other eight Greek municipalities (see Objective 1) with whom Athens works to transfer capacity including the set up of evaluation systems.

### *Capacity Building*

While still in need of capacity building, different projects aim at increasing the diversity and development of the skills of the municipality's staff to plan and implement integration actions. For instance, the Open Society Fellowship offers the opportunity to a migrant or refugee to work directly with the municipality on projects and programmes related to the inclusion of refugees and migrants in the cities. Still, language remains a significant barrier as many migrants cannot make use of the opportunities, initiatives or programmes offered because of their limited knowledge of Greek. Limited familiarity with how to complete the required administrative procedures as well as limited knowledge of the different initiatives is also a common reason why migrants underuse the municipal services. Further, there is no systematic language training in place at all levels that could help address the language barrier from the migrant side. The appointment and increased use of cultural mediators or interpreters could be a significant contribution to address the issue.

### *Cooperation with non-state actors*

Non-state actors, including foundations, play an essential role in delivering services to migrants and refugees in Athens. As opposed to other cities, some of the municipal services and employees working, at least partly, on migrant- and refugee-related issues – are funded by non-state actors. Since 2015, the Athens Partnership (AP) was launched in order to streamline private contributions to migrant and non-migrant related services in the city, with lead support from the Stavros Niarchos Foundation. Another example of coordination is the previously-mentioned ACCMR. From the evidence collected it seems that the representation of refugee and migrant associations among the stakeholders participating to the Committees could be increased. While the services provided by this coordination structure are essential to meet refugee needs, it is important that the city doesn't create parallel structures to universal public services. It should also strive to transfer tasks to the city when possible, in order to avoid creating long-term dependency on donors.

### *Evaluation*

The Municipality of Athens launched the Athens Observatory for Refugees and Migrants (AORI) in October 2016. Its mission is to monitor refugee and migrant flows and to produce data on their characteristics and integration outcomes. This initiative contributes towards filling an important data gap and shedding light on the living conditions of many migrants. After this first profiling survey, the Observatory is working on a systematised survey to collect information about refugee integration outcomes. To do so, it works in close collaboration with the National Statistic Authority. This work needs to be supported and extended to the entire migrant population, not only refugees, to better identify their obstacles in accessing services and opportunities.

***Best practices that could be replicated******Steering of refugee- and migration-related issues comes from the highest levels of city hall***

A political milestone with regard to migrant and refugee integration was the appointment of a Vice Mayor for Migrants and Refugees in 2016 and the establishment of a Department for Social Integration of Migrants and Refugees within the city administration.

***Integrated Accommodation scheme for Asylum Seekers and Refugees - The triplet scheme***

Asylum-seeker and refugee families hosted in apartments rented by the City of Athens (Athens Development Agency - ADDMA) within the framework of the UNHCR ECHO-funded programme are supported by a triplet – a social worker, an apartment manager and an interpreter. The triplets ensure a comprehensive approach to meet the needs of the families who spend from three to six months in the accommodation (as described above). They also constitute a point of reference for the neighbours to facilitate contacts with refugee families and reassure their potential concerns.

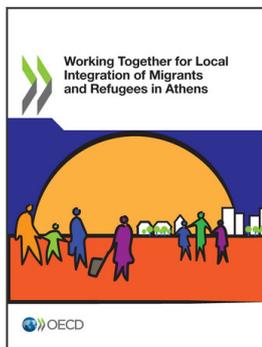
***Migrant Participation***

Since 2011, Athens established a *Migrant Integration Council*. This consultative mechanism, involving the municipality and six migrant communities, is an interface to inform the municipal council about migrants' needs and to formulate recommendations and proposals that specifically affect this group.

Also, in the generalised context of limited public service availability, migrant associations provide public services directly (e.g. child care, language classes, etc.). For instance, migrant doctors provide specialised health services for migrant workers and refugees. Further, a network of migrant women (Melissa) was the first to mobilise to address the needs of female refugees and organise activities for their empowerment and education.

Further, migrant associations such as Generation 2.0, composed of second generation migrants, advocate for increased visibility and to play a more active role in the city's public life.





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